

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942

ER6 Rural Irish ER6

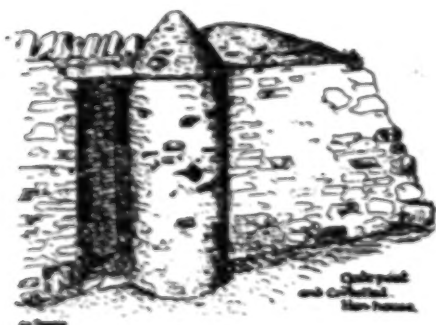
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IRISH HERITAGE

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235



Hen-house.



Well-head and Corbelled Hen-house.

Fig. 38. Two views of hen-house.

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[757]

Some of the holy wells visited throughout Ireland for their reputed curative powers are protected by corbelled coverings of some antiquity: one may cite the wells at Struell near Downpatrick and Ronogue's Well near Cork. Domestic wells also frequently show some degree of corbelling, but free standing well-covers like that shown in Fig. 41 are rare. To the same class of construction belong most of the surviving sweat-houses which were resorted to by rheumatic cases, profuse sweating being induced by heating the interior with turf fires beforehand. In certain counties, for example Cavan, these structures are quite common and were used into living memory. In Rathlin Island I was told that girls would go to

FARM BUILDINGS

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343Corbelled Pig sty
A. Gault

Fig. 39.

the sweathouses in order to improve their complexions before paying a visit to the Lammas fair at Ballycastle. It should be added that the treatment is said to have included a final plunge into cold water: running water is generally found alongside the sweat-houses (Fig. 40).

Such buildings are, from the simplicity of their construction, undateable: there is nothing to show, in many cases, whether they were erected a hundred, a thousand or even four thousand years ago, and though one suspects that many examples are no more than a century or two old—indeed the Gaeltacht turf-houses are still being built—they are in truth ageless. But the functions of the stone-roofed houses have changed. Once tombs of the dead and homes of the

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Sweathouse. A. Gault

Fig. 40.

BROWNE—*Ethnography of Inishbofin and Inishshark*. 345

Begging is practically unknown, and drunkenness, as a habit, does not exist, the sobriety being very noticeable on holidays, though occasional bouts of drinking are sometimes indulged in when a good take of fish has been made. They are very conscientious in their religious observances, and depend greatly on the advice and control of their clergy, with regard to temporal as well as spiritual affairs. Sexual irregularities are extremely rare, no case of illegitimacy having been recorded from the islands for years. [81] [735] [273] [793] [848]

As fishermen they are brave, hardy, and extremely venturesome; this applies especially to the men of Inishshark, who are reputed in Boin to be the best and most daring boatmen on the west coast. [81]

Quarrels often occur, but a regular stand-up fight appears to be unknown, the men usually contenting themselves with abusive language, or at most a sudden blow or stone-throwing. A woman when angered may use very abusive language towards a man, as she would be practically safe from any fear of physical violence on his part, even when she was very provoking. [578] [81]

On the other hand, they are not without faults. In their ordinary life they are thriftless, and not too cleanly in many of their habits, and have but little regard for ordinary sanitary laws; their veracity, too, is not altogether unimpeachable, while the people of the mainland allege that they have a very strong aversion to the payment of debts, rent, and cess, for the last-named of which they owe over £1300. [81] [515] [651]

The habits and manners of the people of Shark are much the same as those described above. The people are noted for their loyalty to one another; they never tell any stranger anything about their local affairs. They are kindly and civil to visitors, always crowding down to assist them on landing, but are said to be capable of acts of ferocity when roused. [609]

5. *Folk-names*.—The following list of fifty-one surnames comprises all those now to be met with on the islands. Some of these names, however, are those of families not long established on the islands, while others, formerly common, as Gorham and Halligan, are now without representatives. [551]

The Gorhams are still, to some extent, connected with Inishbofin, as one of them is proprietor of the only shop there worth the name, and in addition holds a farm, but he lives on the mainland, and manages them by deputy, only occasionally visiting the place himself. It is possible that, owing to the heavy emigration, other surnames may also have disappeared. In the list of surnames given in the [444]

BROWNE—*Ethnography of the Mullet, Inishkea, & Portacloy*. 615

mentions that at one time the people of Inishkea were much noted⁶⁹¹ for it, and that the fate of the two men, who some time in the last century ruined themselves in a lawsuit about a sheep, became proverbial, and litigants were warned to remember the fate of "Malley and Malone." C. O.¹ also refers to this peculiarity, which nowadays seems to be more characteristic of the mainland people than the islanders.

In the course of the cases arising from this tendency, many curious examples of ingenious cross-swearing occur. Intoxication is rather¹⁸¹ prevalent on fair days and holidays, and at weddings and other^[273] festive occasions, but at ordinary times there is not much of it among the country people. They appear to be conscientious in their^[771] religious observances, and depend much on the guidance and advice of their clergy.

As will be judged from the extent and variety of their folk-lore,^[789] they have a great love for the supernatural and mystical.

As regards morals, though illegitimacy is by no means unknown,^[848] yet, when the size of the population is taken into account, it is so rare as to be very creditable to the moral tone of the people.²

A stand-up fight rarely occurs when men quarrel, there may be one or two blows struck, or stone-throwing may be indulged in, but^[578] disputes do not usually get beyond cursing and vituperation.

As parents they are affectionate, but careless and unequal in their treatment of their children, at one time over indulging them, and at^[855] another punishing severely for a slight fault.

With regard to industry, but little can be said in their favour,⁴⁶¹ though energetic by starts, during which they are capable of a great deal of work, accounts agree in stating that they dislike steady^[81] occupation, and are indolent. It should be remembered, however, that there has hitherto been but little inducement to them to cultivate steady industry. The women seem always to have plenty of work on hand, and to do it.

In this district, as in many others, the people are not very careful^[81] in their re-payment of debts, and shopkeepers do not now give credit to the same extent as formerly. As to rent and cess, to the payment⁴²⁶ of these, too, a strong aversion is often manifested.

Many of their habits are not over cleanly, though this is largely¹⁸¹ due to the wretched nature of their houses, and a strict regard for⁵¹⁵ truth is not a prominent part of their character.⁵⁷⁷

¹ "Sketches in Erris and Tyrawley."

² The total number of cases which occurred between the years 1884 and 1893 was 18.

KILNS AND CLOCHAUNS

of water. I was told on Rathlin Island that eligible girls would take a sweating bath to clear their complexions before the annual visit to the Lammass Fair at Ballycastle on the mainland. They were in demand also during kelp-burning operations—a notoriously filthy occupation. Not all sweat-houses were built of stone. Wood-Martin quotes accounts of some which were dug into an earth bank and 'finished with sods', while others were excavated in turf banks.¹ He also records that water was sometimes poured on stones inside the sweat-house, 'thus converting it into a vapour— as well as a sweat-bath'.² 343 757 [515]

More intimately linked with the house is the turf-shelter, the Irish equivalent of the English coal-shed. In the drier eastern part of the country a built shelter is not necessary, and the peats, skilfully built into a huge turf-stack protected from the driving rains by a wall or gable, perhaps improve by exposure to the winds, but in the wetter west unless the turf is under cover it must be dried in small quantities in the loft or by the fire before burning. In parts of Kerry the turf is stored in large clochauns: elsewhere narrow oblong or oval stone enclosures are erected, their walls loosely built to allow the wind to blow through. The peat-store or cleit of St. Kilda was similar—an oblong corbelled stone building with open joints. 343 372

The well is another essential item of equipment of farm or clachan, and it is often provided with a corbelled stone cover. Since springs are abundant, except in bare limestone country, the wells are not deep and few are fitted with windlasses. In their absence quite elaborate ramps with stone steps are sometimes needed to obtain access to the water, and the whole structure being roofed, some examples (for instance in the south-east of Co. Down) are considerable architectural feats (Fig. 40). In the limestone districts the woman of the house may have to walk as much as half a mile to carry drinking water from a dip-well. It is now carried in buckets but was formerly transported in stave-built piggins balanced on the head. The peasant makes a virtue of necessity by asserting that almost every spring well yields 'the finest water in all Ireland, and never runs dry'. Wells are regarded as chancy things, not to be 312 343

¹Wood-Martin, *Elder Faiths*, II (1902), 166.

²*ibid.*, 165.

OLD PISHROGUES

and a handful of thatch taken from above the door of his house.²³⁴
 Butter-making must have been a chancy and critical business⁷⁸⁹
 when each family had only one or two cows, ill-fed for a large
 part of the year, and there were fairies, witches and blinkers to
 contend with. The protective charms and prognostications
 connected with churning are legion. If you should enter an
 old-style mountain kitchen when churning is in progress you
 may well be invited to lend a hand, or at least to 'leave your
 weight on the staff,' just to show that your intentions are not
 evil. There must be no bad words during churning, no quarrels,
 no singing or drinking: to drink anything is presumably to
 dilute the milk. If the milk splashes the churner is fated to
 marry a drunken mate. When the butter at last breaks a small
 ball of it is traditionally taken and smeared on the wall or tossed
 on top of the dresser to bring luck to the house, perhaps
 originally as an offering to the fairies. And when the churning
 is finished the staff should be twisted round three times and
 placed across the mouth of the churn. There are many other
 precautions that may be taken: a horseshoe—preferably 'a shoe
 of one heating'—tied to the churn or nailed to the bottom; a
 nail from a horseshoe or from a coffin driven into churn or
 staff; a ring of salt placed on the lid; a twig of rowan tied round
 the churn. Or the plough coulter should be heated in the fire,
 and the churnstaff tied with a straw rope to the fire-grate: if
 the staff is made of rowan-wood so much the better. If despite
 all precautions the butter does not come there are ways of
 catching the thief. For instance, a cake is baked and stuck with
 pins and a bunch of yarrow placed in the churn. The thief will
 come crying to the door in pain, and he must not be allowed in
 but turned away.

Special precautions should also be taken to make the house⁵¹²
 safe at night from unwanted visitations. Before the fire is raked
 and 'smooored' (buried in peat-ash) a spark should be dropped³⁵²
 into the foot-water, the water in which feet have been washed
 and to which many superstitions are attached. The carded flax^{[515]●}
 should be placed under a weight, the band taken off the spinning
 wheel and the quern dismantled. Many stories are told of the
 risks involved in letting the fairies have access to these things.
 Finally the besom should be placed against the door: the

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264 fork. It is not unusual for a man to eat six or eight large spuds at a sitting, and
415 the pot used to boil potatoes for a large family is piled high indeed. Spuds also
[231] are fed to cattle, poultry, and pets. The diet of families which are most prosperous,
[184] keep tourists, or whose members are acculturated is more varied than the diet that
I have just described, and these families utilize the shops more than is usual.

164 The excessive intake of carbohydrates, particularly by children, coupled
• 515 with the almost complete absence of dental hygiene, has resulted in universal
[262] tooth decay among the folk. Many people in their twenties and thirties already
wear false teeth, and toothache is the most common physical ailment. My wife
and I discovered but one adult who cleans her teeth, and she only once a week with
[1753] a cloth and toothpaste. The islanders eschew use of the toothbrush for several
reasons: some believe that bad teeth are inherited or decay is a contagious disease,
and nothing can be done to prevent deterioration once it has set in; others equate
decay with the common cold, a natural affliction suffered by everyone which must
be accepted fatalistically (and masochistically); while still others regard the tooth-
[626] brush as an English innovation or its use as an upper class affectation—"If I used
one they would say I had fancy ideas."—to be shunned on these grounds. A story
whose plot was laid in an island in the region of Inis Beag appeared in the
Saturday Evening Post, and was illustrated with photographs taken in Inis Thiar.
The Dublin model who portrayed the heroine in local attire was recognized as an
outsider by the folk who viewed the pictures because her teeth were white and even.

Clothing

291 The term traditional applied to the much publicized Inis Beag garb refers
177 to the homespun vests and trousers and blue woolen shirts of the men, the ankle-
178 length red and blue woolen skirts and a type of shawl of the women, and the
[184] cowskin shoes and woven belts worn by many men but only a few women. Some
of these articles of wear are shared with peasants of the region, or were in the past
and thus are vestigial; others are unique to Inis Beag; and all are in the process
of being replaced by mass produced mainland attire. Of 111 adult males in Inis
Beag, 11 have given up the local dress, as have 9 of the 85 adult females. Most of
these 20 have returned to the island from having spent time on the mainland or
abroad, and as a matter of prestige have chosen to retain the foreign costume.
Practically all of the young men past school age who have not been away dress
traditionally, but none of the women between ages 18 and 29 do; the youngest
women who wear the red or blue skirt are of the latter age.

294 Although most clothing worn by the islanders is tailored locally, everything
286 but the trousers and vests of the men are made from imported materials. Clothing
is tailored from cloth woven by the island weaver from Inis Beag wool which is
291 washed, dyed, and spun in the homes but carded on the mainland. The trousers
294 are brown or grey depending on whether a brown or black weft is combined with
[286] the white warp on the loom; they are called "britches" when styled differently as
to seam and hem. Vests also are brown or grey in front with backs dyed blue, and

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[513] underclothing retained. The latter practice reflects extreme modesty as well as
[515] the need for warmth. Islanders have an obsessive fear of nakedness which permits
them, after infancy, to bathe only their feet, hands, and face and precludes bathing
in the sea and the use of bathtubs.

Crafts

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[501] Of the several crafts practiced in Inis Beag, only three are strictly income
[295] instead of combined subsistence-income activities: the manufacture of *curach* by
four men, the mass production of stockings by four girls in the factory at the
coast guard station, and the fashioning of miniature canoes by a single man.
[244] Sweaters, woven belts, cowhide shoes, and the small multi-colored shawls are
[438] made both for local wear and for export. Most of the exported sweaters are sold
[657] to a particular mainland firm for resale, as are all of the model canoes, and the
[437] factory is sponsored by Gaeltacht Eireann which markets the stockings produced.
Other craft commodities are sold by the folk directly to consumers, most of whom
are tourists.

501 The long rowing canoe of Inis Beag is distributed widely along the west
[171] coast of Ireland, from Cos. Donegal to Kerry, and its seaworthy qualities as well as
[174] the rowing skill of the crews which sail it are renowned. One of a number of
[178] varieties of the coracle, which has a heritage extending back to the Mesolithic, it
is built of deal and oak lathes and covered with tarred canvas (see Fig 10). Before
canvas was introduced, untanned seal, cow, and horse hides were used for covering,
and these were reported from a nearby island less than 100 years ago. The *curach*
is approximately 20 feet in length, has a high pointed nose, is round bellied and
lacks a keel, draws less than 6 inches of water, and is rowed with narrow 10-feet-
501 long oars. These oars are bladeless for use in rough seas and are pivoted on single
502 tholepins rather than in oarlocks. The looms of the oars overlap, so that oarsmen
must pull cross-handed, and on long journeys a lug sail is hoisted to relieve the
crew. For the neophyte, rowing a *curach* cross-handed in a heavy sea can be even
more abusive of the hands than rebuilding a gateway in a stone fence. Most
canoes hold three men—are "three-oared"—but two-, four-, and even five-men
curach were or are used. Loads up to a ton and a half can be accommodated, and
trussed asses, sheep, and horses sometimes are transported in them.

501 Forty-two householders in Inis Beag own three-men canoes, among whom
[502] three have additional two-oared *curach*. The craft are stored upside down in "cots"
on either side of the strand along the margins of the common land, although
Terrace villagers use a small beach along the northeast coast of the island; they
are carried between the cots and the water upside down on the shoulders of the
crew, and in that position resemble gigantic beetles. Two Inis Beag men are at
[433] work building canoes most of the time, and when they are not busy at this task they
[322] construct furniture for local sale. Two other men manufacture *curach* occasionally,
[184] and another two who once built them have discontinued the practice. No canoe
makers are found elsewhere in the region; therefore, Inis Beag artisans serve the

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[157] tunity to create additional capital; they are content to rest on their psychological
[124] laurels, are limited in their aspirations, and are indolent. They betray a smugness
of attitude much resented by their less prestigious fellows. A woman spoke con-
temptuously of the "great estates" boasted of by these men, when she discussed
with me the many land disputes that she had witnessed during her lifetime.

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When one asks the folk to rank prestige symbols and the positions of
individuals in the status hierarchy, the only consensus which emerges is the
placing of land and capital at the apex of the rank order of symbols, the assign-
ing of men who possess these in greatest quantity to the top of the hierarchy, and
the placing of landless men at the bottom. Least prestigious among the landless
are those who are descendants of fisherfolk, most of whose families were recent
migrants to Inis Beag. An example of the verbal abuse to which they are subjected
is a remark made to one of them by the king in a heated argument, who said,
"Why don't you spend your time gathering periwinkles like your father?"; the
man replied with equal venom, "Who was your father, a king?" Other prestige
symbols delineated by the folk, although not mentioned by all and variously ranked,
are advanced education, prestigious kin abroad, economic skills, and singing, danc-
ing, and storytelling abilities. Strength and courage occasionally are cited, but they
are considered symbols of a past era (which nativism and primitivism make
difficult to assess) and have come to lose much of their significance.

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Only one family in the island prides itself on its material possessions,
because of the influence of the householder's brother in the United States who
sends remittances, so it is said, and often visits Inis Beag for lengthy stays. I was
asked to take photographs of this family, whose members posed before various
pieces of modern furniture and appliances, to be sent to relatives—the only such
request ever made of me. There are a few families, however, which pride them-
selves on the neatness and cleanliness of their houses and streets and the appearance
of their members, and they are apt to denigrate families which are slovenly. The
lack of emphasis on material possessions in Inis Beag presents a startling contrast
to the situation which prevails in most of the Western world, including many
peasant societies and the mainland Irish; equally contrasting is the apparent lack
of opprobrium attached to doing relief work on the roads and receiving the dole.

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Although 28 islanders have received some secondary education during the
past 15 years (excluding priests and nuns), only 2 have attended university—
both of them before the Second World War at University College, Dublin. Two
women and a man have become teachers, and the former have returned to Inis
Beag to teach in the national school. Most of the advanced students today are
preparing to teach or nurse or are gaining technical skills, and it is not expected
by their parents that they will return to the island to live permanently. Families
are boastful of their members with advanced education, and those families without
such representation often urge their children to do better in the local school, and
try to muster financial support for their high school education if scholarships are
not forthcoming. I was told by a man disgusted with the lack of interest in school
shown by his son, "The man who uses a pen is better off than the man who uses a
spade or trammel net." Prestige also is gained through having a close relative
become a nun or priest or achieve success in the business or professional world,

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Sex and Regression in an Irish Folk Community

Many kinds of

behavior disassociated from sex in other societies such as nudity and physiological evacuation, are considered sexual in Inis Beag. Nudity is abhorred by the islanders, and the consequences of this attitude are numerous and significant for health and survival. Only infants have their entire bodies sponged once a week, on Saturday night; children, adolescents, and adults, on the same night, wash only their faces, necks, lower arms, hands, lower legs, and feet. Several times my wife and I created intense embarrassment by entering a room in which a man had just finished his weekly ablutions and was barefooted; once when this occurred, the man hurriedly pulled on his stockings and said with obvious relief, "Sure, it's good to get your clothes on again." Clothing always is changed in private, sometimes within the secrecy of the bedcovers, and it is usual for the islanders to sleep in their underclothes.

Despite the fact that Inis Beag men spend much of their time at sea in their canoes, as far as we could determine none of them can swim. Four rationales are given for this deficiency: the men are confident that nothing will happen to them, because they are excellent seamen and weather forecasters; a man who cannot swim will be more careful; it is best to drown immediately when a canoe capsizes far out in the ocean rather than swim futilely for minutes or even hours, thus prolonging the agony; and, finally, "When death is on a man, he can't be saved." The truth of the matter is that they have never dared to bare their bodies in order to learn the skill. Some women claim to have "bathed" at the back of the island during the heat of summer, but this means wading in small pools with skirts held knee-high, in complete privacy. Even the nudity of household pets can arouse anxiety, particularly when they are sexually aroused during time of heat. In some homes, dogs are whipped for licking their genitals and soon learn to indulge in this practice outdoors. My wife, who can perform Irish step-dances and sing many of the popular folk songs, was once requested to sing a seldom-heard American Western ballad; she chose "The Lavendar Cowboy," who "had only two hairs on his chest." The audience response was perfunctory and, needless to say, she never again was "called out" to sing that particular song.

The drowning of seamen, who might have saved themselves had they been able to swim, is not the only result of the sexual symbolism of nudity; men who were unwilling to face the nurse when ill, because it might have meant baring their bodies to her, were beyond help when finally treated. While my wife and I were on the island, a nurse was assaulted by the mother of a young man for diagnosing his illness and

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